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Caroline Walles on Disaster Chaplains who provide Spiritual First Aid

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The "Dance of Disaster"

For almost three years, Nebraska has been viewing disaster behavioral health as an integral component of the response which takes place at the time of a disaster. In fact, the need for disaster behavioral health as part of the immediate or first response to a disaster has been written into the state's formal disaster plan. However, because there is a shortage of behavioral health providers in Nebraska (88 of 93 counties are considered shortage areas) partnerships with "natural helpers" – including clergy and faith leaders – are being forged. Out of this necessity has come the Nebraska Disaster Chaplain Network, a creative expansion of the first responder resource pool.

Disaster Chaplains are providers of "Spiritual First Aid." In essence, they are like providers of physical first aid – recognizing that they do not have the qualifications of CPE trained chaplains – but they do have the capacity to be present, listen, support and comfort. They have to undergo an elaborate screening process, including an interdisciplinary interview, a background check and an agreement to abide by a code of ethics and guiding principles which establishes that proselytizing is not acceptable.

There is a body of disaster spiritual care training material available, and over the course of the next few years we will attempt to incorporate that into our regular training schedule. There are other key components of disaster spiritual care that are not easily captured in a curriculum formula; the ability to not be overwhelmed by the chaos; the ability and willingness to network with a broad array of other responders and build those relationships; and the capacity to recognize that no matter how much training you have, you will be affected by the disaster. In Nebraska we talk about the "Dance of Disaster," which means that we are flexible in our relationships and graceful with everyone we encounter – and especially with ourselves as we grow into this ministry of caring for others.

The Nebraska Disaster Chaplain Network is in its infancy. There are many lessons yet to be learned, and many relationships yet to be developed. The cadre of chaplains who are currently credentialed is small, but growing. There is an understanding that the question is not "if" a disaster will happen, but "when" will the next disaster occur, and "where." Many of those who want to join the network feel that they have not been adequately trained for this ministry, and are anxious to learn more and apply it, even in the everyday small scale critical incidents which confront their congregations and communities. We are learning that we will never be fully prepared – but even that knowledge is an important part of the process of becoming a Disaster Chaplain.

Caroline Walles works with Interchurch Ministries of Nebraska as a liaison between community organizations and the faith community. She also works as a research associate at the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center, with a special focus on the development of the Nebraska Disaster Chaplain Network. Caroline has completed

advanced training in STAR (Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resiliency) through Eastern Mennonite University. This training has created a lens through which Caroline recognizes that the trauma of disaster calls for spiritual care. Caroline and her husband Harry live in Lincoln, regularly visited by their four grandchildren – who bring love and laughter into their lives.